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Prof. Jonathan Goodhand, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London,
London WC1H 0XG (corresponding author), jg27@soas.ac.uk

Dr. Bart Klem, University of Melbourne, Parkville VIC 3010, Australia
bart.klem@unimelb.edu.au

Dr. Oliver Walton, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath BA2 7AY
o.e.walton@bath.ac.uk

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Mediating the margins: the role of brokers and the Eastern Provincial Councils in Sri Lanka's post-war transition

Notes on contributors

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Jonathan Goodhand is a Professor in Conflict and Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London and Director of the Melbourne School of Government's Master of Development Studies program. His research interests include the political economy of aid and conflict, NGOs and peacebuilding and 'post conflict' reconstruction. Recent publications include 'Checkpoint, Temple, Church and Mosque: A Collaborative Ethnography of War and Peace in Eastern Sri Lanka' (with Spencer, J Hasbullah, H, Klem , B, Korf, B and de Silva, T (2014)) and London: Palgrave MacMillan and The Afghan Conundrum: Intervention, Statebuilding and Resistance (with Sedra, M.). He currently leads two research projects 'Borderlands, Brokers and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka and Nepal: War to Peace Transitions viewed from the margins' (2015-17, ESRC) and 'State Frontier and Conflict in the Asia Pacific (2014-18, University of Melbourne -SOAS)

Bart Klem is a Lecturer in Development Policy at the University of Melbourne. His research focuses broadly on the inter-connections between development and violent conflict. More

specifically, he is interested in development processes, aid, politics, de facto sovereignty and public authority in (violently) contested environments and transitional contexts. Recent publications include 'Showing One's Colours: The political work of elections in post-war Sri Lanka', *Modern Asian Studies* (2015), 'Constructing legitimacy in post-war transition: The return of 'normal' politics in Nepal and Sri Lanka?', *Geoforum* (with Byrne, S. 2015), 'Checkpoint, Temple, Church and Mosque: A Collaborative Ethnography of War and Peace in Eastern Sri Lanka' (with Spencer, J, Goodhand, J Hasbullah, H, Korf, B and de Silva, T (2014). He is an investigator on two on-going research projects 'State Frontier and Conflict in the Asia Pacific' (2014-18, University of Melbourne) and an SNF funded project on frontier dynamics in post-war Sri Lanka.

Oliver Walton is a Lecturer in International Development at the University of Bath. His research focuses on the ways in which NGOs and civil society organisations generate and maintain legitimacy, and on the political implications of NGOs' engagement in peacebuilding. He has also conducted research on liberal peacebuilding, third-party mediation, and conflict prevention. Recent publications include 'Understanding Contemporary Challenges to INGO Legitimacy: Integrating Top-Down and Bottom-Up Perspectives', *Voluntas* (with Davies, T., Thrandardottir, E., Keating, V.), 'Framing disputes and organizational legitimation: UK-based Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora groups' use of the 'genocide' frame since 2009', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2015), 'Learning lessons or unearthing truths?: Using evidence to inform mediation policy', *Civil Wars* (2014). He is co-investigator on the ESRC-funded project 'Borderlands, Brokers and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka and Nepal: War to Peace Transitions viewed from the margins' (2015-17).

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Abstract

This article explores the political dynamics surrounding the Eastern Provincial Council during Sri Lanka’s post-war transition. We show that decentralisation constituted an intervention in conflict, rather than a solution to it. It creates new institutional arenas to re-negotiate centre-periphery relations, resulting in new forms of political mobilisation. There are crucial spatial dimensions to these contentions: it involves contested territorialisation of power, scalar manoeuvring, and boundary drawing. We illustrate how wider tensions between deconcentration and devolution play out in Sri Lanka’s Eastern Province, highlighting the key role performed by brokers in mediating centre-periphery relations, both through and alongside the Provincial Council.

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Keywords

Sri Lanka, conflict, decentralisation, local governance, brokers, transition

1. Introduction

It was a blistering hot afternoon in Batticaloa, eastern Sri Lanka in mid-2008. Whilst most people were taking a post rice and curry siesta in this sleepy coastal town, one of the authors (Author A) and his research assistant were trudging through the heat to the 'kachcheri' (government secretariat) for an interview. The only sounds were the drone of the cicadas and a group of schoolboys playing cricket on a dusty patch of grass nearby. Then from the distance we heard the wailing of approaching sirens, followed in seconds by a cavalcade of vehicles going at great speed. There was barely time to get out of the way and catch a fleeting glimpse of two military jeeps escorting a black Land Cruiser with tinted windows. Was this a central government dignitary or army general paying a quick visit from Colombo? No, it transpired that the cavalcade was escorting a local figure, someone who six years before had been an LTTE cadre, fighting ~~in the bush~~ against the Sri Lankan government. His *nom de guerre* was Pillayan (his real name, Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan) and his fortunes had changed dramatically after the 2002 ceasefire. Following a sequence of rebel splits, internecine fighting and the government driving the LTTE out of the East, Pillayan was elected as Chief Minister of the Eastern Province. He was at the height of his powers when we saw him speeding through Batticaloa. But his meteoric rise was to be followed by an equally dramatic fall from grace. He lost the 2012 elections, became an embarrassment to the government, and was eventually arrested on charges of murder.

Although Pillayan's rise and fall was a sudden one, it is not atypical of the shifts in power and fortunes that frequently accompany, and are features of, contested post-war transitions. His trajectory captures an important dynamic, in which power can oscillate back and forth

between centre and periphery; the battles for authority, positions and resources can be at their most intense and deadly on the margins of the state. Historically in Sri Lanka, violent challenges to the state emerged from the periphery, contributing in turn to central government's anxiety about asserting its presence in these zones. In light of this tension, the politics around decentralised government has always been a key arena of contestation, which is explored below in relation to Sri Lanka's Provincial Council system. Far from being a technical solution to the 'ethnic problem' – a means of dispersing power and democratizing the state – we argue that local government has been a lightening rod for local, national and international sets of interests and insecurities and as a result has added new layers of complexity to a protracted conflict. As Pillayan's career also shows, an analysis that takes for granted the binary divisions between the national and local, formal and informal, state and non-state is deficient; brokers tend to dissolve or transgress such boundaries and categories, exploiting the points of friction between them, so as to direct or filter the flow of power and resources. Successful brokers – which Pillayan, in the long term, evidently was not – are able to manage and keep in tension contending sets of pressures that emanate from the state at the centre and their constituencies in the periphery.

In section 2, we highlight how a stronger focus on space, territory and brokerage can add to and deepen the insights yielded by this research. Section 3 provides some basic background on Sri Lanka's conflict, devolution, and the Eastern Provincial Council. Our empirical analysis then consists of two parts. In section 4, we examine the institutional politics of the Eastern Provincial Council during the post-war period (2007-2015). In section 5, we provide three illustrative accounts of brokers to explore the informal networks of power that underpinned and shaped the formal institutions of local government. We finish with a set of conclusions and possible areas for future research.

The empirical analysis draws upon a combination of the authors' long term experience of research in the East since the 1990s (Author A) and 2000s (Authors B and C). Specifically it draws upon fieldwork conducted in the East in 2006-2009 (A and B) and 2010-2016 (B), and in Colombo in 2012 (A) and 2016 (A and C). This research involved the systematic tracing of key players in East Sri Lanka's political landscape over time (complemented with key informant interviews and observations to capture common perceptions about these players) and detailed accounts of key turning points or moments of rupture, including elections, military victories and political ruptures. The ~~present article revisits older research material to capture longer term patterns. It~~ article also draws upon secondary historical, political science and anthropological literature on the Provincial Council system and political dynamics in the Eastern Province.

2. Bringing the margins back in: decentralisation, space and power

Much of the policy literature on local government and conflict has focused on the ~~basic~~ question of whether decentralisation is an effective tool for resolving conflict in divided, post-war societies. The debates about constitutional design can broadly be divided into an integrationist position, which argues for strong centralised state institutions in order to override or contain centrifugal tendencies. Or an accommodationist position, which argues for political and legal institutions that reflect and build upon the divisions of post-war societies, though power sharing arrangements involving the devolution of power or a federal system.¹ ~~There are nuances within this second position, about the powers that should be devolved, or the type of federal system to be adopted — for example Horowitz's well known distinction between federalism which 'draws through' ethnic boundaries versus that which 'draws around' and encircles major ethnic groups.² Also important — in the Sri Lanka case~~

~~especially—is the question of whether there should be asymmetric decentralisation or ‘special autonomy’ as a conflict resolution mechanism.~~

This article aims to go beyond what are often presented as largely technical questions of constitutional design, to explore how processes of post war state reform and decentralisation create new arenas of contestation, onto which competing international and domestic political narratives can be projected. This more complex reading of decentralisation processes is supported by existing case study research and other papers in this special issue. Four key points stand out in relation to Sri Lankan case.

First, the democratising and peacebuilding potential of decentralisation efforts are shaped and constrained by local elites and patronage networks.³ Whilst post-war political settlements and elite pacts may undermine democracy, they may in fact be stabilizing if they lead to new, and sufficiently inclusive rent-sharing agreements.⁴ Second, decentralisation efforts often produce unforeseen and unintended effects. They may fail to achieve their ostensible goals because they run counter to the interests of central state and peripheral elites, but they may also lead to new forms of political mobilisation and claim making. Third, the stated goals of decentralisation efforts frequently cloak competing sets of ambitions and interests. One key tension is between deconcentration and devolution, the former referring to administrative decentralisation and the latter to political decentralisation⁵. ~~In Sri Lanka this has boiled down to whether decentralisation becomes a vehicle to extend the power and penetration of the central state, or conversely it is seen as a means to provide political voice and autonomy to under-represented or excluded minorities—whether through devolved power within a unitary state, or more radically through a federal system.~~ Fourth, decentralisation schemes have important discursive and symbolic value. They may be strategically framed by the state or international donors to signal commitment to peace, or to discredit ‘uncooperative’ and

unruly local actors. As explored below, decentralisation may be presented as a conflict resolution mechanism, whilst in fact supporting a process of one-sided state consolidation.

Analytically, decentralisation policies are often premised on what Ferguson and Gupta have called a ‘vertical topography of power’, the erroneous assumption that the state floats in a relatively abstract form above society, thus exaggerating its spatial reach and vertical height.⁶ It also suffers from methodological nationalism; this tendency to treat states as natural entities, part of the normative order of things, is to fall into the ‘territorial trap’.⁷ This reification of the state is based upon simplistic binaries between state and non-state, public and private, national and local. Political economists, anthropologists and geographers question the notion of the state as a fixed object or as a finished product. They usefully deconstruct and denaturalise the idea of the state as a coherent and rational entity, seeing it as something that is always in the making, blurring binary distinctions and highlighting the networks, coalitions and material foundations that underpin or undermine the state.⁸ A growing focus on institutional hybridity or ‘twilight institutions’⁹ explores how political authority is built from below through complex amalgams of state and non-state institutions, practices and actors.

Analyses of local government tend to focus on scale, but strangely neglect space – strange because local government is explicitly a technology of spatial ordering. We believe that the political dynamics surrounding local government institutions located at the centre such as municipal councils in Colombo are likely to be very different to those facing local government institutions at the margins of the state. Therefore, there is a need for a more nuanced examination of local governance that exposes the complex political topography of the state and the uneven processes of rule and development that unfold within and across the territory of the state.¹⁰ We seek to do this by bringing together an analysis of *space*, *scale* and *networks*.¹¹ By doing so we work with ideas related to the politics and the meanings of place

and the importance of boundaries which delimit and divide space and territory. ~~Drawing on Lefebvre, this means exploring how spaces are 'perceived, conceived and lived';~~ how place-making and boundary drawing are simultaneously linked to governance processes at the global, national and local levels; and how flows of resources and ideas, mediated through networks and brokers, tie together these different scales and spaces.¹²

Our analysis draws upon a literature that has focused on questions to do with space and power and the role that the state's margins play in negotiating and constituting power at the centre.¹³ These marginal zones are neither 'governance vacuums' nor disconnected from circuits of capital and power at the national and transnational levels, but they have unique features in terms of how they are related to the putative centres of authority and capital accumulation.

Some peripheries are conceived of as frontier regions: fuzzy zones of transition between different centres and registers of power, which are represented as 'empty spaces' that need to be pacified and incorporated into the civilizing project of the state.¹⁴ State expansion and market penetration are associated with the closure of frontier spaces, whilst extended conflict and the retreat of the state may be associated with the re-opening of frontiers. Frontier dynamics – and associated notions of centre and periphery – are liable to shift during wartime and post-war transitions. Power is spatialized in complex ways and states seek to govern the margins by transcending old boundaries and creating new ones. Conversely non-state authorities may seek to draw different boundaries, linked to enduring linguistic, ethnic or religious identities. Therefore local government boundaries intersect with and overlay a complex cartography of power and identity.

The margins of the state are typically sites of institutional plurality and patchiness, and as a result actors located at the political or economic centre will often rely on intermediaries or

brokers to mobilise political support or to access markets and capital in these peripheral zones. Such brokers may constitute simultaneously the connective tissue and point of friction between centre and periphery. As Eric Wolf notes, they ‘stand guard over the critical junctures or synapses of relationships which connect the local system to the larger whole’.¹⁵ They are often powerful yet vulnerable figures who shape how power is imposed and resisted, and struggle to survive by ‘maintaining the tensions which provide the dynamic of their actions’.¹⁶

Post-war transitions can be understood as moments of rupture or ‘revelatory crises’ when ‘opportunities and risks multiply, when the scope of outcomes widens, and when new structural scaffolding is erected.’¹⁷ Brokerage, in such situations, is likely to be rearranged along new lines of authority, alongside continuities with former alliance-building strategies.¹⁸ The location and functions of brokers during these moments of rupture varies. Some, such as the example of Abdullah explored below, can be viewed as ‘embedded brokers’, deeply rooted in peripheral communities who perform a gatekeeping role. Others, such as the case of Punchinalame, are ‘representative brokers’, whose capacity to broker is founded on their strong ties to the central state.¹⁹ And some, such as Pillayan, may start off as the former and then end up as the latter, as they increasingly get pulled into the orbit of the central state. Brokers, then, occupy a complex and fluid political landscape – they may successively or simultaneously be mediators of coercive, political or economic resources, and their position in relation to the central state can oscillate between ‘exit’, ‘voice’ and ‘loyalty’.²⁰ The outcomes of brokers’ activities are characteristically ambiguous. They can both facilitate the extension of the central state’s political or economic claims on the margins (as shown through the cases of Pillayan and Punchinalame), whilst also providing a focal point for the periphery’s claims on the state (as in the case of Abdullah).

The relationship between the central state and the periphery is typically transformed by war. The margins of the state often serve as incubators of grievance and are central to the dynamics of war and peace. The edges of the state may become critical sites of institutional and socioeconomic innovation with new forms of political authority and new sources of capital accumulation and investment emerging from the periphery.²¹ In post-war contexts, troublesome frontier regions are often zones subjected to projects of stabilisation and pacification by the centre and become key sites of contestation between competing visions of development, peace and security. Development processes in these regions may be presented as pacifying, but they often involve highly coercive processes of primitive accumulation including land grabs, asset stripping and illicit/illegal economic activities. These frontier zones may also be sites of experimentation in which the central state trials new forms of policing, surveillance and militarized development, which are then redeployed at the centre in order to consolidate social control and centralise power.

3. Towards a new political settlement? Sri Lanka's Provincial Council System

The label 'local government' is a complex and contested term in the Sri Lankan context. Generally, local government, or 'local authorities' (LA), refers exclusively to the lowest tier of government, i.e. Municipal Councils, Urban Councils and village-level *Pradeshiya Sabhas*. While these local government bodies play a role in day-to-day welfare of the population, they have not assumed any significance with regard to Sri Lanka's major political contestation around the reform of the state. The opposite is true for the Provincial Councils, as explored below.

Figure 1, below, shows the dualistic system of deconcentrated government, which takes the form of secretariats at the district and town level that are agents of the central state, coupled

with weak devolved government in the form of the PCs and LA. Both tiers are involved in services and planning, which increases opportunities for corruption, political conflict, and wasteful duplication in service delivery.

Figure 1: Overview of administrative layers

	Central administrative hierarchy	Elected bodies with devolved authority
National	President	Parliament
Regional (northeastern Dry Zone)		(Merged North East Provincial Council)
Provincial	Governor	Provincial Councils
District	Government Agent (GA)	
Divisional	Divisional Secretary (DS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pradesh Sabhas - Municipal Councils - Urban Councils
Ward	Grama Niladari (GN)	(Rural Development Societies)

An extensive treatment of the history of statebuilding and the post-colonial Sri Lankan state is not possible here.²² For the purpose of our argument, two points must be made. Firstly, a key spatial division in Sri Lanka centres on three ecological zones: 1) the paddy producing, lowland, wet zone, 2) the cooler “upcountry” known for its plantations, and 3) and the Northeastern dry zone frontier. ~~The large and scrubby buffer zone that separated the coastal settlements in the northeast from the rest of the country was inhabited by communities practicing shifting cultivation, which were more mobile and remained less legible to the state.~~²³ The Northeastern frontier became central to the discursive and material reproduction of the post-colonial state, performing a range of functions; a zone of demographic expansion for the land poor peasantry in the wet zone; a civilizational frontier occupied by the Tamil ‘other’ which helped promote a sense of nationhood amongst the Sinhala majority; a zone of

accumulation as a result of investment in settlement projects which brought 'barren' lands under cultivation.

Secondly, these frontier dynamics fuelled the Tamil separatist agenda. In the 1980s, contentious politics escalated into full-blown war and this heightened the intensity of, and contradictions between these centripetal and centrifugal forces. On the one hand the war in the northeast created a process of de facto decentralisation, with the opening of the frontier regions, as new forms of insurgent governance limited the reach and authority of the central state.²⁴ At the same time, in response to the conflict the state became more militarized and more centralised, with greater power flowing to the executive due to the state of emergency.

It is in this context that the Provincial Council (PC) system was introduced. The councils were established as a result of the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987. The Accord, the product of strong Indian pressure, was an attempt to resolve the conflict through power sharing arrangements. India's 'solution', the PC system, was seen as a compromise: it preserved the unitary state, stopping well short of federalism, whilst providing the minority communities with a level of regional autonomy.

The PCs were widely viewed as externally imposed and were never fully embraced by any of the major political parties in Sri Lanka.²⁵ Although the Indo-Lanka Accord fulfilled one of the key demands of the Tamil groups -- the (temporary) merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces into a single administrative unit -- it fell well short of their maximalist position of a separate state, and the LTTE reneged on the agreement soon after.²⁶ ~~The Indo-Lankan accord was backed up by a large military intervention -- the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) -- which became embroiled in the conflict and ended up withdrawing. In the end, India's~~ An ill-fated military intervention by India was followed by renewed and intensified warfare. The Provincial Council system, though it had few domestic supporters, endured.

~~The evolution of the Provincial Council System demonstrates a recurrent tension between the goals of a Sinhala-dominated central state that sought to undermine devolution through administrative, legal and political means, and a Tamil polity that has sought to challenge the centralising thrust of the state both by shaping the character of these new institutions (for example, applying pressure for a merged North Eastern PC) and by establishing de facto control over territory in the North and East.~~

The Provincial Council system was superimposed on top of this complex socio-political terrain. And in the process it spatialized power in particular ways, creating a political geography that privileged certain levels, and certain administrative/electoral delineations over others.²⁹ Firstly, the PC can be understood as a conscious intervention in the scalar politics of the conflict. Earlier government decentralisation schemes bypassed the provincial level and focused on the district level;³⁰ the reason for this was that it enabled the centrally controlled distribution of development resources at the grass roots, whilst undercutting Tamil efforts at wider ethno-linguistic mobilisation. However, the Tamil polity, demanded what was essentially a federalist institutional set up involving asymmetrical devolution and that recognized a Tamil Homeland (a spatial imaginary which saw the north and east as a contiguous block of Tamil speakers).³¹ In fact both positions were based on simplifications which sought to elide the complex social geography of the margins. The outcome was a deeply compromised one: a system based on provinces, ie a middle ground between the Northeastern region and districts, but this was then subjected to a second compromise through the provisional merger of the Northern and Eastern Province. ~~This resulted in an administrative entity covering the whole Northeast (effectively matching “Tamil Eelam”), as a temporary deviation from a system that was explicitly premised on provinces.~~

Secondly, the power and autonomy of the PCs was deliberately curtailed as the centre retained control over provincial finances, whilst administrative oversight was ensured

through a governor appointed by the president. Key policy fields like control over land, finance and law enforcement were placed on a so-called concurrent list: they were supposed to be jointly managed by centre and province, but effectively remained under control of the former. ~~The final wording of the Provincial Council Act left more powers in the hands of the centre, particularly those relating to raising revenues and the calling of elections.~~³² The powers of the PCs were further constrained by the highly centralised structure of the civil service, a conservative judiciary which tended to side with the centre, and with the entrenched nationalist ideology of the unitary state, which was deeply-rooted in the bureaucracy.³³

~~Thirdly, the PCs became a powerful symbol of India's heavy handed intervention, which further delegitimized them in the eyes of both Sinhala and Tamil nationalists. The LTTE explicitly disowned the PC system and branded those operating in it as traitors. It boycotted the first elections of the merged North-Eastern PC in 1988.³⁴ With the Indian withdrawal in 1990, much of the East fell under LTTE control apart from urban enclaves along the coastline, including Batticaloa and Muslim-populated towns.~~

4. Wartime and post-war decentralisation politics in the East

The empirical part of this article focuses on the dynamics of decentralised politics in Eastern Sri Lanka during the last years of the war and the subsequent post-war transition. We first look at the institutional architecture and politics that surrounded the Eastern Provincial Council. We then explore the manoeuvring of three contrasting brokers to show how the struggles around decentralisation are channelled not only through the visible, formal structures of the EPC, but also through informal networks that may work in parallel to, or at odds with it.

The institutional politics of the EPC

During the war in the 1990s, the state's face in the region was largely a military one. The merged NEPC had no elected politicians; the minimal role that it had was played by the governor and civil servants. The war radically opened the entire northeast frontier, which became a zone of political experimentation. The LTTE established de facto state structures, and the outreach of the Sri Lankan state was heavily circumscribed by the war: older institutional forms like the civil service and electoral politics continued but under the shadow of new authorities and military rule.³⁶ The East was the most volatile area throughout the war. It was the site of the breakdown of major ceasefires in 1990 and 2006. The war ~~opened up the frontier regions, leading~~led to a complex political geography, divided into 'cleared' (government controlled) and 'uncleared' (LTTE controlled) areas. Violence and insecurity led to the unmixing of populations and a complex mosaic of Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese settlements along the East coast.³⁷

This political landscape was transformed after the 2002 ceasefire, which re-calibrated centre periphery and intra-periphery relations. Initially, at the national level, this translated into an historic convergence of the government's and LTTE's positions, manifest in the 2002 'Oslo declaration' in which both sides agreed to explore a political solution based upon a federal structure. However peace talks soon broke down, leading to a volatile period of no war-no peace. A wide range of actors jockeyed for position, as new spaces for decentralised politics and nationalist contestation opened up and others closed. Old alliances and loyalties came under pressure, new networks and forms of collaboration emerged. One manifestation of these shifts was the LTTE split and the tilting of the strategic balance in the government's favour, which contributed to resumed war in 2006 and then cumulated in the LTTE's defeat, first in the East (2007) and then finally in the north (2009).

It was in the east where these changes first manifested themselves and in hindsight, it was the Eastern margins (rather than the North) that played the constitutive role in ending the war and shaping the post-war political settlement. It was here that the splinter group of the LTTE, the so-called Karuna faction, emerged, which weakened the LTTE militarily and crucially undermined its claim to be the sole representative of the Tamils. The political party that emerged out of this faction, Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP) started talking about 'South Eelam' rather than Tamil Eelam – breaking the unity of the imaginary state into two pieces. ~~As Sánchez Meertens points out: 'Once loyalties stopped being arranged around the imagined homeland, they started to be increasingly configured around personalities rather than purposes'.~~³⁸

It is also in this period that the Provincial Councils were brought back into play. The merging of the Northern and Eastern Council – a compromise to the Eelamists when the system was created – was ruled unconstitutional in 2006. This resulted in the de-merging of the NEPC into a separate EPC and NPC, a change with major spatial and electoral significance: not only did it prevent the convergence of decentralised government with the claimed Tamil homeland in the Northeast (ie the NEPC), it also improved government chances of ruling the periphery by proxy. With the strong Tamil majority in the North, the government had no hope of controlling the NPC, but the multi-ethnic Eastern province would be much more vulnerable to divide-and-rule tactics. Moreover, the East was conquered first, thus creating a political testing ground for post-war decentralisation politics.

After defeating the LTTE in the East, the government was able to exploit ambiguities in mainstream narratives about decentralisation and conflict by conflating two distinct agendas: a *peacebuilding narrative* which focused on how the PCs support peace by providing autonomy and self-rule, and a *statebuilding narrative* that PCs could support a process of stabilization, state expansion and state consolidation in the Eastern Province, which had

previously been partly under the control of the LTTE. This was operationalized through the ‘Nagenahira Navodaya’ or Eastern Reawakening programme which included a range of construction efforts, typically accompanied by a big sign displaying president Rajapaksa and representative brokers like Pillayan or Punchinilame (see below).

While these peacebuilding and statebuilding narratives held some appeal to international actors, the central state clearly prioritised the latter, and paid lip service to the former in an attempt to deflect criticism from western donors. Rajapaksa used elections in the East and the North to forestall and deflect international criticism of the government, particularly in response to impending United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) deadlines. ~~As well as minimising criticism, this strategy of holding elections in the East in 2008 led to a softening of the position of donors such as USAID, the ADB and the Government of Japan, who had previously been cautious about providing development aid.³⁹ Both the NPC and EPC thus had important symbolic value and provided an entry point for international engagement and investment from donors and the diaspora.~~ Holding the Eastern Provincial Council elections in 2008 signalled the transition from military occupation towards an inclusive ‘tri-national’ political settlement, which had the backing of local populations and was supportive of local development needs. The EPC also provided opportunities for the central government to buy-in local powerholders and to legitimise their alliances with allies like the TMVP.

Therefore the PC system served a variety of interests: it provided international players and particularly India, with a useful mechanism for demonstrating tangible progress in addressing conflict-related issues to the Indian public. The PCs also offered space for local actors including paramilitary groups such as the TMVP to consolidate or navigate their way through a shifting political landscape, for example by making a transition from military to political actors.

Political brokerage through and alongside the EPC

Political brokerage does not only evolve within the official decentralised architecture, but typically establishes connections and affinities that escape these institutional logics. Most brokers derive some of their authority from their linkages with a particular institution, but their powers extend beyond these formal arenas. Other studies of religious brokers and civil servants in Eastern Sri Lanka have highlighted that, while the political space carved out by some brokers may contract during war time, it often expands for others.⁴⁰

Pillayan: from rebel to political chief

~~As described in Sánchez Meertens detailed account,~~ Pillayan's unlikely rise to power started with a boundary crossing, literally and metaphorically -- in 1991 he crossed the Valaichenai River, venturing into the 'uncleared' area of Vaharai to join the LTTE. He was an unlikely recruit; he was physically small and, unlike his classmates, had kept a distance from militant groups until then.⁴¹ In contrast to Karuna, the man he was to later displace, he had a relatively lowly position in the political wing of Batticaloa. Even by the time of the 2004 split with the LTTE, there were five higher-ranking members between him and Karuna.⁴² Yet, he ~~somehow~~ managed to leap frog over them and usurp the leader in 2007— according to Sánchez Meertens (2013) because of control over information, participation in resource distribution and external contacts.

However, in many respects, his career gets swept along by wider events. After the de-merging-merger of the northern and Eastern Province and the ousting the LTTE from the East, the first ever elections of the EPC ~~were~~ are held in 2008. The Rajapaksa government seeks to consolidate its military success and manages to secure a majority by promising leaders from all three ethnic groups the Chief Minister position. Much to the dismay of the Muslim electorate, it finally offers the post to Pillayan, who sweeps the Tamil vote on a shared ticket with the Rajapaksa government. ~~He is replaced by a Muslim politician and promoted into irrelevance as a presidential advisor. Pillayan's fall from grace is confirmed when the Rajapaksa government is defeated in presidential and then parliamentary elections in 2015, thus removing his source of funding and protection. In October that year, he is arrested on allegations of a murder committed during the bloodletting associated with the first split.~~

Pillayan's utility as a broker was very context specific and time bound.⁴³ The Rajapaksa government first deployed the TMVP as violent frontiersmen of the state, which involved franchising out 'violence rights' in the context of an open and unruly frontier. Then, in the aftermath of its military success, Pillayan represented a more malleable broker than Karuna, but could at the same time provide a gloss of democratic legitimacy to the EPC.

He was thus absorbed into government through a key position, but cut off from major political resources: the legislative power of the EPC was deeply constrained and the bulk of government largess was channelled outside the Council, through characters like Punchinilame (below). Pillayan was finally discarded when his utility expired. His rise and fall were thus driven by a constellation of forces well beyond his control.

However, his ability to survive this sequence of events, demonstrates remarkable agility, and a large portion of luck. After all, most of his fellow cadres did not make it through this turbulent transition with any success. Many were killed, either in the wake of the Karuna split or in the final phase of the war. Those who survived were forcibly demobilised, humiliated and indoctrinated. ~~Many of those who tried to play different sides were assassinated. Pillayan not only managed to survive, he assumed leadership of the TMVP and converted its coercive resources into political and economic power as the boundaries of legitimate political action changed. He~~ staged an electoral campaign and managed to hold out for four years in a deeply unstable political landscape.

Remarkably, many of the people we interviewed when he was Chief Minister, were somewhat understanding of his predicament. Some felt that the problem was not him, but rather the conditions under which he worked. While Pillayan was in office, the central government effected a range of interventions that caused concern among Tamils and Muslims alike. There was deep anxiety about post-war militarisation of public life, land-grabbing under the guise of Buddhist sites, military camps or development projects and shifting ethnic demography through the arrival of Sinhala farmers and gerrymandering. “Pillayan makes statements about the plight of the Tamil people,” a Tamil church leader told us. “He sees what is happening in the East. But he can’t oppose this openly. ~~... If he walks away from the President, he is a lost cause. Pillayan’s security is vulnerable.~~” He can’t do much, but he will hold on.”

The same informants were often less forgiving about Karuna. During the 2010 parliamentary elections, one of our Muslim respondents explained: “Karuna makes these absurd statements. Saying that fighting for our rights has failed, we must now focus on development. Like that,

he is talking. The Tamils will not vote for him. They are a military group. Tamils are fed up with militaries.” It was obvious that Pillayan also had a militant background – no one would have forgotten about the TMVP’s ability to instil terror through intimidation, forced recruitment, killings and “white van kidnappings” or its violent electioneering. And yet, informants tended to direct their anger towards the government rather than Pillayan; a Tamil civil servant ~~lamenting the policy of importing more Sinhala civil servants into EPC institutions told us: “The Governor and [central ministries] are doing this. Even though Pillayan is the Chief Minister, he has no power.” One of his colleagues added told us: “The problem lies with the non-implementation of the 13th Amendment.” Powers over police, land, finance and education should have been devolved to the EPC, “but for those things no authority was granted to the provinces.~~ It is not about the Chief Minister. Whoever becomes the Chief Minister, no one can do anything. Pillayan is very good with the Eastern people, but he can’t do much. He is a good man.”

Evidently, this apparent sympathy did not translate into electoral success. Pillayan’s victory at the 2008 polls emerged out of a peculiar constellation of adversaries – Pillayan along with a range of established Muslim and Sinhala strongmen – competing for votes under a government umbrella, with virtually no credible opposition candidates. ~~The main Tamil party – the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), closely associated with the LTTE at the time – boycotted the polls. Tamil voters could essentially choose between staying at home, or flagging their Tamil identity by voting for the TMVP.~~⁴⁴ This was different when the TNA joined the race during the elections of 2010 (Parliament) and 2012 (EPC). In both cases, the TMVP was wiped out except in a few small pockets of Batticaloa District. Pillayan had tried to nurture a political community primarily based on a regional Eastern Tamil identity. His statements were more conciliatory than those of the TNA, and the iconography of the TMVP

replaced rifles and bullets with rice, sunrises, handshakes as well as religious (Christian and Hindu) references.⁴⁵ He sought to gain a foothold in a post-war Tamil political arena, ~~where an exclusivist ethno-separatist front had started to dissolve as intra-Tamil politics around divisions of class, caste, region and religion rose to the fore. Ultimately, but~~ his political project ultimately failed to gain much traction. The more militant repertoire of the TNA prevailed.

Pillayan's experience illustrates how the fortunes of frontier brokers can fluctuate rapidly in post-war environments, as they seek to exploit opportunities provided by the changing dynamics on the ground, and as the goals of the political centre shift. The TMVP performed a short-term function for the regime of stabilising the region and helping to legitimise their rule, but these benefits diminished as the Rajapaksa government's military and political control over the region was consolidated. This opened up the opportunity for new forms of brokerage, which brings us to our next case, Punchinilame.

Punchinilame: from small town politician to viceroy

Local roots are a key source of political capital for elected leaders in Eastern Sri Lanka.

Almost all politicians, from local councils all the way up to parliament rely on an ethnic bloc vote from their home constituency – sometimes complemented by the community of their spouse. ~~Town-based politicians that move up the chain are the ones who manage to tie themselves to other localities as well as voters from other ethnic backgrounds, often through the deployment of state resources.~~ In light of this, Susantha Punchinilame is a highly unusual politician in Eastern Sri Lanka. As a Sinhala United National Party (UNP) leader from Ratnapura (in the South-West) with a rather chequered history he appeared an unlikely

candidate to mobilise voters in the ethnicised political landscape of the Eastern Province. Nonetheless he became one of the region's primary political leaders and like Pillayan, the combination of brokering skills and his political utility for the government, helps account for his rise.

When Punchinilame was parachuted into the East, few people had heard of him and those who had remembered that he was suspected of murdering a rival politician in Ratnapura.⁴⁶ “He has a bad character,” a council member of the EPC told us. Having switched party and region, Punchinilame became the minister responsible for the Eastern Province under the Nation-Building Ministry, the primary patronage distribution network, headed by Basil Rajapaksa (the president's brother). If the EPC was originally conceived as an attempt at pacifying the periphery by giving a limited voice to communities in the East, the Nation-Building Ministry can be understood as an attempt to curb the secessionist impulse through top down economic development. Although the inner workings of the ministry were opaque, everybody knew this was where political power was concentrated and resources flowed. And soon, pretty much everybody in the East knew Punchinilame was the man to go to. His name ~~was not difficult to remember: in Sinhala it~~ translates as “little sir” in Sinhala, a name ~~that~~which seemed to ~~naturally~~ suit the small man with a moustache who acted like a viceroy under the tutelage of the ruling Rajapaksa family.

Punchinilame was known to drive around the remote corners of the Eastern Province with his impressive motorcade of 4-wheel drives and police escorts to fix people's problems on the spot. A senior Muslim community leader from Ampara District observed that, “Punchinilame was familiarizing himself with the region and he came to visit me. When he left he said: ‘Oh your road is not in good shape. You need a nicer one.’ And in seven days — seven days! —

we had a tarmac road. After all those years of asking our own politicians at the Pradeshiya Sabha! ~~He is a politician. [...] He is one of those who needs development to survive.~~

Punchinilame performed miracles with a flick of his finger or a quick chat on his cell phone.

“People were unhappy with the OIC [the Officer in Charge, the local head of police and a very powerful figure],” a Muslim community leader from Trincomalee District added. “They hated him and told Punchinilame. He replaced him on the spot.”⁴⁷ His political potency was also linked to thuggery, intimidation, and cunning manoeuvres. Another interviewee from a poor rural village in the East noted that, “-if we don’t vote for him, he may give us trouble”.

~~During election rallies that we attended, his entourage included some very large muscular men with fancy sunglasses, who claimed experience with the French foreign legion in Africa, foreign military training, as well as senior positions in the Sri Lankan police.~~

His political powers were shown to full effect during the first parliamentary elections after the war, in 2010. As an “imported politician” running in a district (Trincomalee) where all his contenders had a clear home advantage, many thought he would not be able to mobilise sufficient electoral power. Moreover, the elections were seen as an opportunity to demonstrate the unpopularity of the government among Tamil and Muslim voters. But within a few weeks of campaigning, the contours of Punchinilame’s victory were starting to emerge. Organisers from rival parties or candidates gave in to the pressure and joined him.

Underserved Tamil and Muslim constituencies, who were disappointed by the relative impotence of their own leaders, swayed. Many thought there was little point opposing the government and from that perspective forging ties with the Punchinilame, who had a direct line to Basil Rajapaksa, seemed like the smartest thing to do. After all, no politician could really be trusted, but Punchinilame was at least hard working, politically skilled, and provided the most credible access to government patronage. A retired civil servant ~~from~~

~~Punchinilame's role in Trincomalee was to act as a broker between the government and the people. He was a man of close contacts. The people in Trincomalee are experiencing a new kind of politics. Susantha is not a good politician, but he knows his art."~~

After his victory in the 2010 elections in Trincomalee Punchinilame continued to be a major force there in the years to follow. He provides a fascinating parallel to Pillayan. Both have violent pasts, and both emerge as brokers in moments of rupture during the post war period. Pillayan is Tamil and local; Punchinilame Sinhala and imported. Pillayan managed to muster a level of sympathy, but little political potency; the reverse was true for Punchinilame. Both these political figures thrived because they provided a form of brokerage that was politically expedient for the government; arguably Punchinilame was attractive because of his capacity for political mobilisation, whilst one of Pillayan's main assets was precisely his limited powers and room for manoeuvre. Both fulfilled a central role in the Rajapaksa administration's drive to rule the east following the removal of the LTTE. They enabled the government to manage post-war democratic forces with tokenistic forms of representation and ample flows of largesse. Pillayan's role was to act as a figurehead and to prevent the provincial council from taking an overly activist stance – in other words he served to moderate centrifugal forces and in this sense he laid the ground for Punchinilame, whose role was to strengthen centripetal forces, by forging direct political and economic ties between the regime and constituencies in the east. ~~Despite the contrast between them, both brokers end up backing a post-war agenda that involved muting bottom-up grievances about government policy (Pillayan) and amplifying top-down efforts of building a support base around resources rather than ideology or ethnic aspiration (Punchinilame).~~

Abdullah: local leader, chameleon and survivor

The contradictions between the centripetal and centrifugal political forces manifests itself in tangible ways for those engaged in politics in Eastern Sri Lanka. This becomes very clear when we look at political leaders who represent their people in the provincial or local council, but whose constituencies are too insignificant to scale up. Particularly in the Muslim community this leads to some irreconcilable tensions. People expect their leaders to voice their concerns and make claims on the state, but at the same time, leaders need to be able to access to the government's political machinery so as to ensure a flow of resources and services to their constituency. This leads to a rather schizophrenic politics of trying to act against the same forces one is making overtures to. This requires a kind of brokerage that does not simply straddle difference, but grapples with wholly oppositional forces – or to draw on Hirschman, they have to exercise 'voice' and 'loyalty' at the same time.

The case of a local council leader in one of Eastern Sri Lanka's Muslim pockets, a man we will call Abdullah, is illustrative of this challenge. Abdullah's political career was marked by this need to jockey for position. He had survived as a supporter of the main Muslim party (SLMC), while running for either mainstream party (UNP, SLFP) and forging ties with key politicians of pretty much all colours. Throughout this history of changing sides, several factions had sought to gain access to his constituency, either by making him promises, or by intimidating him with subtle threats, or fabricated police charges.

According to Abdullah, after the defeat of the LTTE, most people in his town were deeply dissatisfied with the Rajapaksa government. Apart from the corruption, family nepotism and the rising cost of living, they were particularly worried about land. A Buddhist monk had arrived to lay claims on large swaths of paddy land for sacred sites and the military was

cordoning off land for security reasons. When Abdullah was chairman of the local council (Pradeshiya Sabha), he was forced to sign the paperwork endorsing some of the land deals. People higher up told him “this goes above you, you have to sign”. Particularly for leaders who sided with the opposition, it was difficult to resist such pressure. “In the opposition, we can’t oppose the government,” Abdullah explained. “If they go against us and we are in the government, maybe we can do something.” Moreover, he added, “if you are with the government, they will reward you. The Nation Building Ministry, for example, will bypass all and fund the Pradeshiya Sabha directly.” ~~We talked about the challenges of siding with a government that one is trying to resist.~~ We asked him: “doesn’t it trouble you to work with the very people who threaten you?” ~~Do you trust them?~~ Abdullah replied: “We have to manage.” The crucial thing is for the people to stand together. “We must all unite, or we will lose. We must all unite behind me. I have tactics and cunning.”

When we visited him a few years later, Abdullah had aligned himself with Punchinilame ~~to preserve a foothold in government networks~~, but his constituency was raising increasingly vocal alarm about post-war land tussles. More Muslim farmers had been evicted by the military and the tussles over designated sacred land were coming to a head. People were trying to get their voices heard, Abdullah explained, but the EPC could not do much for them. In fact, one of Pillayan’s relatives was affected by one of the land struggles in Abdullah’s constituency, but even the Chief Minister could not stop it. With local elections going on in the neighbouring district, Abdullah found himself reluctantly campaigning for the government on one side of the border, while leading a protest against land grabbing practice of that same government in his own town. During the protest, he and his fellow Muslim leaders had been arrested and then released on bail. The ensuing court case would

momentarily stall the contested land claims, but also left them vulnerable to government pressure.

In the following week, Abdullah invited us to his house to hear all about this. Sat in a circle of his reception room we listened to ~~the a~~ sequence of testimonies dominated by the post-war grievances of the local Muslim community. Another local politician briefed us about the different sites that were being taken. The ulama leader explained about the increasingly anti-Muslim sentiment that the government was fuelling; Muslim protesters needed to avoid violent escalation at all cost, because ~~they would be branded as terrorists, and~~ this could unleash Sinhala mobs. And several Muslim farmers told us in some detail about their eviction. ~~One of them had started sleeping at his relative's house out of fear of the military. When he came back one morning, the barbed wire of the military camp had been moved: it now included his plot. Therefore the subject of discussion was dominated by the post-war grievances of the local Muslim community.~~

And then, just as they were discussing whether to appeal to senior Muslim politicians elsewhere in the country, there was a remarkable shift. From the front yard, one of the boys hanging around the house came rushing in whispering in an alarmed voice “minister, minister, minister”. What followed was the political version of a fire drill. ~~Before we realised what was happening,~~ ~~t~~The entire group made its way into the private quarters and out the back door. The domestic worker came by the tables to collect all the teacups, the glasses and the snacks; he lifted the tablecloth to shake the crumbs off and replaced it. In the meantime, Abdullah moved out the front door to welcome his unexpected guest Susantha Punchinilame, and when he came in, all he saw were the foreign guests having a cup of tea. What happened in that half minute was like the quick closing of the curtain between two scenes with a

different cast and a different dialogue. Exit disgruntled Muslims, enter the government ‘Viceroy’, with Abdullah (and his foreign guests) as the point of continuity.

A polite conversational game of chess followed, with carefully fielded questions and friendly, but somewhat evasive answers. Development efforts after the war had indeed made significant progress. A hint at the minister’s impressive political career elicited some false modesty about his role. Many people had come to like him, because he really worked for the people. He was in direct contact with Basil Rajapaksa who had empowered him to reach down to every village with the necessary support. And yes, there were some unfortunate contentions around land. These were highly complex matters for which a solution would have to be found. Sri Lanka after all was an ancient country (a subtle reference to the glorious history of the Sinhala civilisation) and the sentiments of the majority needed to be reckoned with, but surely there was a way to resolve these issues amicably and reach a compromise. What he meant by compromise was clearly not some sort of power sharing between the central government and the EPC on crucial issues like land and law enforcement. Rather it would involve promoting the vision of Mahinda Rajapaksa, thus leaving behind ethnic antagonisms and pursuing harmonious development. Why could Sinhala farmers not come to this region, just like Tamils and Muslims could move to Colombo? Abdullah just nodded silently.

Brokers and boundaries in transition

The varied forms of brokerage exhibited in these three cases are summarised in Table 1, which outlines five key ways in which these figures differ – in terms of their origins, source of power, constituency, role, and trajectory:

Table 1:

Pillayan ‘The Frontier broker’	Punchinilame ‘The Power broker’	Abdullah The ‘Go-between’
Origins LTTE cadre from Batticaloa	Southern UNP politician from Ratnapura	Local councillor in a small town in the East
Source of power Stage 1: Pre-2008: Access to armed cadres and intelligence; representative of Eastern Tamils; diaspora linkages Post-2008: Official position; government patronage	Proximity to top-level politicians, mainly Basil Rajapaksa State patronage/resources and political muscle	Point of access to, and representative of Muslims in his constituency
Constituency		

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Eastern Tamils, but with shallow roots	No pre-existing constituency in the East	Muslims in his town and surrounding villages
Role Stage 1: militarily weaken and de-legitimize the LTTE Stage 2: deliver a Tamil vote block; legitimize the government takeover of the East	Extend and strengthen patronage networks; funnel resources, discipline and corral opposition	Voice concerns of Eastern Muslim, to make claims on the state and act as a transmission mechanism or point of access for political parties in the East
Trajectory ‘Exit’ (as an LTTE rebel), followed by ‘voice’ (mobilizing a Tamil political voice through the TMVP), then ‘loyalty’ (period of emasculation as Chief Minister), followed by fall from grace (end of backing from the centre with fall of SLFP)	‘Loyalty’ (brought in as the government’s viceroy in the east); fall of regime leading to a decline in influence	Simultaneously exercising ‘voice’ and ‘loyalty’ -- maintaining position in spite of ups and downs

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The first two brokers – Pillayan and Punchinilame – were among the most powerful players in the East during the period studied. ~~The third one – Abdullah – is a less influential town-based politician. The arena in which they operate is heavily shaped by the post-war moment. In an attempt to convert its military success into firm political control over the region, the central government sought to bring key leaders and vote blocks into its orbit. However, building a firm and loyal base among the fractured electorate with roughly equal proportions of Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala voters was no easy task.~~

~~The case of Abdullah illustrates how these contradictions are replicated further down the political food chain.~~

By 2016, there was a new coalition government in power, with Maithripala Siresena from the SLFP as President and Ranil Wickremasinghe from the UNP as Prime Minister. The two key election promises were ‘Good-good governance’ (‘yahapalayanaya’) and state reform by getting rid of the executive presidency and devolving powers to the provinces ~~were two key election promises~~. As for our three brokers, Pillayan had been arrested, Punchinilame was hanging on, and Abdullah was still there, struggling with the everyday contradictions of being a Muslim leader in Eastern Sri Lanka.

5. Conclusions

Accounts of post-war transitions and peacebuilding that only focus on the formal institutions miss a great deal about how these structures are embedded within the political marketplace and wider society. We have argued that processes of decentralisation produce new arenas of conflict and that to understand these, we need to pay close attention to the interplay between formal institutional structures and the individual brokers that weave in and out of them. The EPC became a key arena for pursuing and reconciling post-war struggles between contending political forces at the centre and periphery, but these dynamics were heavily mediated by brokers like Pillayan, Punchinalame and Abdullah. These characters operated in a particular constellation of constraint and opportunity; the dynamics of state expansion and consolidation described here are specific to the frontier, and are marked by contests over the re-drawing and transgression of boundaries. The Rajapaksa government's attempt to re-activate the Provincial Council system after the war represents one highly visible attempt to re-fashion political boundaries and territorialise power. But frontier brokers were also deeply involved in these processes, which can be discerned in the TMVP's nascent attempts to sketch a new political community for Eastern Tamils, or in Abdullah's fraught attempts to straddle and reconcile the competing demands placed on him by agents of the state like Punchinilame and his core Muslim constituency.

In explaining the manoeuvring of these brokers, we may distinguish elements of Hirschman's exit, voice and loyalty.⁴⁸ *Exit*, in the form of fighting for a separate state, and then subsequently leaving the movement (Pillayan); *Voice* in relation to Abdullah's struggles to get his constituencies' grievances heard. But also Pillayan's unsuccessful attempt to create a platform for an Eastern Tamil political community (a career trajectory that moved from exit, to voice and then loyalty). And finally Punchinilame most clearly exemplifies *loyalty* as one of the Rajapaksa's trusted agents in the East. Pillayan's loyalty to that government always

remained unstable. And for Abdullah it is clear that loyalty must always be plural, contingent and transient to grapple with the contradictions of his political project.

These career paths raise questions about the autonomy and agency of frontier brokers – whether they simply follow the scripts set for them by more powerful players and wider structural forces, or whether they have a degree of ‘context freedom’ ~~—in other words is this a story of path dependency or path shaping?~~ Evidently, ~~the case of Eastern Sri Lanka~~our study suggests that this is very time dependent – during moments of rupture, or when frontiers are re-opening, brokers appear to have much great autonomy, than when frontiers are closing and they are being incorporated into central state structures. Few would argue that either of these three characters deserves more than a footnote in Sri Lanka’s history of statebuilding and civil war. And yet, they each played a role both in supporting the Rajapaksa government’s plans for the East and in negotiating their outcomes. The ~~case could be advanced that the Eastern margins played a constitutive role in ending the war and shaping the post-war political settlement~~ and served as ~~—This takes us back to our earlier point about the state’s margins being crucial~~important zones of experimentation and incubators of change.

Each of our three brokers have rather idiosyncratic career trajectories, but at the same time their biographies are intertwined with, and ~~in a small way~~helped shape wider events related to changing frontier dynamics, the demise of the LTTE and reconfiguration of the political constellation in the vacuum they left behind. This frontier story of oscillating power and opening and closing frontiers might be told ~~—at the risk of overly simplifying a complex narrative~~—in five chapters.

During the first chapter (the relative equilibrium prior to the 2002 ceasefire) the Northeastern frontier became a zone of non-state or anti state administrative experimentation. At this time, the provincial council was a frozen entity trumped by various forms of military governance.

Pillayan is a junior cadre, Punchinilame a small town Sinhala politician in the South, and Abdullah jockeyed for position between the various competing political forces. The second chapter (destabilisation following the ceasefire) saw the emergence of the TMVP, ~~which fatally wounded the LTTE~~. And paradoxically the re-scaling of the Tamil national imaginary – from Tamil nationalism, to localism – opened up the periphery to the forces of centralism and Sinhala nationalism. The split enabled firstly the state to regain and strengthen its foothold in the east, a process also supported by the de-merging of the EPC and NPC. The East became a laboratory, ~~or zone of experimentation~~ for rolling out a programme of securitized development and controlled democratisation. Brokers like Punchinilame were brought in as viceroys to secure political turf for the government. The latter was less about local government than local *governance* – brokers were critical nodes in rhizomic networks that underpinned or subverted the formal façade of the EPC. This does not mean the EPC was irrelevant; it was necessary to get important constituencies (international, Tamil and Muslim) on board, but its primary value was symbolic.

The third chapter was precipitated by the defeat of the LTTE – which the TMVP aided through their intelligence and deployment of cadres in the North. ~~This chapter witnessed the rolling out of what had been field tested in the East, leading to the partial but still contested closure of the Northern frontier.~~ Punchinilame entrenches his position in the East, ~~whilst~~ while Pillayan's lease of political life is running out. Unable to mobilize a solid vote bank, his utility to the government declines and he is replaced by a Muslim broker loyal to the government. In many respects, Abdullah, as a small-town politician, constitutes a point of continuity that persists throughout the transition; changing all the time, but keeping things relatively the same. Abdullah had to manoeuvre carefully when the LTTE ruled the areas around his town and repositioned himself when either of Sri Lanka's mainstream parties replaced the other. It is these chameleon-like qualities that enabled him to stay in the game.

This reminds us that decentralisation and institutional reform may not produce the imagined results. After all, there are many small-town brokers like Abdullah, who occupy the synapses between centre and periphery and are simultaneously the connective tissue and point of friction within the system. Although Abdullah was Janus-faced, ultimately he sided with his community when their land was being taken, even though this jeopardised his career as a broker.

In the fourth chapter, the margins started to 'invade' the centre, in the sense that modes of governing and disciplinary powers -- through a state of exception -- that were deployed in the North and East, were increasingly applied to the body politic in the South -- including growing surveillance of the population, arrests and intimidation of civil society, ~~the removal of checks on executive power~~.⁴⁹ This suggests that the margins offer a unique perspective on the state, not because they are exotic, but because the margins represent 'a necessary curtailment of the state, much as the exception is a necessary component of the rule'.⁵⁰ Of course there is now a fifth chapter, which is being played out at the time of writing. Arguably it was the modes of frontier governance that were transferred and applied at the centre that generated the grievances in the Sinhala polity that led to the regime's crisis of legitimacy and its final fall from power. A more inclusive political settlement in which power is more dispersed and negotiated has opened up the space for dialogue on constitutional reform and perhaps a renegotiation of centre periphery relations. And perhaps, for the first time in its history, the EPC may emerge as a genuine political platform for articulating the region's grievances or experimenting with Muslim-Tamil cooperation. The story ends less well for our two power-brokers. Pillayan is in prison, whilst Punchinilame's role as a de facto viceroy declined significantly. Abdullah though remains in the game, ~~as these wider events sweep over him~~. None of these three brokers can claim a central role in this bigger story, but they were certainly unwitting players and their life histories deserve to be studied more closely.

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- ²⁸ For example the leadership of the pre-war TULF was dominated by Jaffna Tamils. It was also a source of resentment within the LTTE that their leadership was disproportionately from Jaffna, while the East provided many of the cadres. These dynamics are replicated in post-war politics with the preponderance of northerners within the high level positions of the TNA. See Wilson, A. J. (1994) "The Colombo Man, the Jaffna Man, and the Batticaloa Man: Regional identities and the rise of the Federal Party", in Manogaran, C. and Pfaffenberger, B. (eds) *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, pp. 143-168.

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- ³¹ There are significant non-Tamil populations within the East, though, most obviously the Muslims (the largest group in the Eastern Province), but also Sinhalese. Both groups have been deeply anxious about the northeast mergers as it sells them out to a Tamil-dominated region. This challenge has been aggravated by some gerrymandering: the inclusion of additional Sinhala-dominated areas through the redrawing of the Eastern Province. Across the country there has been skepticism about the asymmetrical devolution: the northeast covers almost half the country's surface area; the remaining seven provinces are much smaller.
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- ³⁴ This enabled Varatharaja Perumal of the EPRLF (Eelam People's Revolutionary Front) to become Chief Minister, backed by the IPKF.
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- ⁴¹ Sánchez Meertens, "Letters from Batticaloa". Pillayan tells a familiar story, in an interview with Sánchez Meertens, of the incident that caused him to join up. He was on his way to Valaichenai with his brother, when he was stopped at a road block by the Army. He was slapped by the soldiers and felt humiliated and it was only after this experience that he seriously talked about the possibility of joining up with his school friends. He said that 'Joining the LTTE was 100% my decision' (cited in Sánchez Meertens, 2013: 79).
- ⁴² LTTE posters of the six 'traitors' for example put Pillayan at the bottom of the pecking order, Sánchez Meertens, "Letters from Batticaloa".
- ⁴³ There are a number of parallels we could draw here, most obviously to the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) and its leader Douglas Devananda, who played a very similar—if more enduring—role in the North.
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